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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SOFIA 000508

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [KCOR](#) [BU](#)  
SUBJECT: BULGARIA'S MOST WANTED: THE SKULL, THE BERET, THE  
CHICKEN, AND THE BILLY GOAT

REF: A. REF A: 09 SOFIA 154  
[1](#)B. REF B: 05 SOFIA 1207  
[1](#)C. REF C: 05 SOFIA 1882  
[1](#)D. REF D: 08 SOFIA 192

Classified By: CDA John Ordway for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The number and scale of deeply entrenched organized crime (OC) groups operating in Bulgaria present a tremendous challenge to the new government as it strains to enforce the rule of law. The Bulgarian mafia bosses, better known by nicknames such as the Skull, Big Margin, and the Beret have under previous governments been considered untouchable. Bringing these ring leaders to justice would be a major victory for the new government and demonstrate to a skeptical European Commission (and Bulgarian public) that the days of impunity are over. The following list of organized crime figures is by no means exhaustive, but represents some of the most well-known figures whose prosecution and sentencing would signify a major step forward for the Bulgarian government and bring us closer to the day when mobsters like the "Chicken" are no longer free-range. End Summary.

#### BACKGROUND

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[1](#)2. (C) According to a common Bulgarian saying, "all countries have a mafia, but in Bulgaria the mafia has a country." Crime bosses or "Mutri," who often are popularly known by their colorful nicknames, are frequently seen speeding around Sofia in their black BMWs or Mercedes SUVs followed by a group of thickly built bodyguards. Bulgarian OC is particularly active in international money laundering, drug and human trafficking, counterfeiting, and contract killing. Of the 134 contract killings Embassy Sofia has followed since 1993, 73 percent have not made it past the police investigation stage; there have only been a handful of arrests, and even fewer convictions (Ref A).

#### THE SKULL

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[1](#)3. (C) Bulgaria's most infamous gangster is Vasil Krumov Bozhkov, aka "the Skull." Bozhkov founded his first company in 1990 before creating his current business empire, NOVE HOLDING, comprising over 30 companies and numerous subsidiaries. Bozhkov, whose wealth is valued at USD 1.5 billion, is one of the richest men in Bulgaria and almost made the top 50 richest Eastern Europeans list in 2008. He is now slowly moving out of the organized crime business and primarily owns casinos, hotels, and media outlets. However, he is still

reportedly active in money laundering, privatization fraud, intimidation, extortion, racketeering, and illegal antique dealing. He maintains close relationships with many former government officials (Ref B).

#### THE MARGIN BROTHERS

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¶4. (C) Despite being arrested in a 2005 for planning three assassinations and participating in organized crime (Ref C), Krasimir "Big Margin" Marinov and his younger brother, Nikolay "Small Margin" Marinov, remain free on bail. The brothers lead a well-known organized crime organization known as Intergroup (formerly SIC), whose illegal activities include drug trafficking (especially heroin), financial fraud, car thefts, smuggling, extortion, racketeering, and prostitution. The Marinov case, which has been postponed on at least four separate occasions, has become symbolic of the inability of the Bulgarian courts to bring about swift justice. And thanks to a legal loop hole in Bulgarian law, requiring the physical presence of all codefendants and lawyers - who always happen to be too ill to make court dates - the brothers were released on bail in December 2007 and remain at large.

#### THE GALEV BROTHERS

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¶5. (C) Plamen Galev and Angel Hristov, aka "the Galev Brothers," jumped into the spotlight in 2008 following the revelation that then-current Interior Minister Rumen Petkov

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met with them while they were under investigation for organized crime activities (Ref D). The pair was later arrested and charged with torture, prostitution, blackmail, extortion, and drug running - before being freed and granted temporary immunity in order to run for Parliamentary seats during the July 5 national election. Despite losing the election and immunity, the Sofia City Prosecutor, Nikolay Kokinov, quietly announced that they had been released on bail. Bulgaria's Supreme Court of appeals also ruled in mid-July that the Galev case must be tried in Kyustendil District Court rather than Sofia - thus allowing them to be tried in an area where they have significantly more support and have practically ruled for the last decade.

#### THE BERET

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¶6. (C) On February 6, the Bulgarian police apprehended the infamous gangster Zlatomir Ivanov, aka "the Beret," for his alleged link to three contract killings and two attempted murders. Many believe that Ivanov was one of the most important Bulgarian drug kingpins as well as the mastermind behind several of the country's emblematic execution-style underworld killings. The Beret has been charged with three murders, including the murder of one of Bulgaria's notorious drug lords, Nikola Ivanov, aka "the Beaver," who was shot nine times in the chest and head on October 8, 2006 in an upscale Sofia nightclub. He was also charged with the murder of Radoslav Velokov, aka "the Unfriendly," who was shot in the head upon leaving the Sixth Police Precinct in Sofia where he had been interrogated about the attempted murder of another mafia leader. Like the Marinov brothers, Ivanov tried to receive immunity by running for a Parliamentary seat, but his request was denied since charges were filed against him before his Parliamentary bid. According to local press reports, the star witness in his trial has refused to testify against Ivanov citing threats to his life. Although Ivanov remains in prison, it is not clear whether he will be convicted.

#### THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION

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¶7. (S/NF) Todor Batkov, aka "Borat," a Bulgarian lawyer and businessman, serves as a proxy and front-man for businesses and interests of the infamous Russian-Israeli businessman, Michael Cherney, aka "Mikhail Chorny." The Bulgarian government labeled Chorny a national security threat, banning him from entering Bulgaria in 2000. Chorny maintains influence over his companies - including Levski football team, Standart Newspaper, and Bankya Palace Hotel - by transferring ownership to Batkov. Batkov has solid political connections - in 2008 Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov awarded him the Stara Planina Order, the government's highest honor, for his activities in promoting Bulgarian culture, arts, and sports. Batkov donates heavily to charitable organizations for seriously ill children, orphans, the Pirogov Emergency room, and local universities. He also contributed one million leva to the "You Are Not Alone" campaign in 2007 to help free the Bulgarian medics once held in Libyan prison and gave 11 cars to the Ministry of Interior. Batkov is still on the board of the Bulgarian mobile phone company, MTel, and is managing director of Batkov, Stoev, Botev, and Associates law firm. He was a close associate of the late controversial Bulgarian banker and former Parvanov advisor, Emil Kuliev, who was gunned down in Sofia in 2006.

#### THE CHICKEN AND THE BILLY GOAT

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¶8. (SBU) Nikolay Metodiev, aka "the Chicken" is considered one of the major smugglers in Bulgaria and has been prosecuted several times for the contraband of goods. His nickname dates back to 1998 when he was arrested (and later acquitted) for smuggling 11 tons of illegal chicken meat. Metodiev was arrested again in 2003 for attempting to coerce customs officials to allow the importation of illegal Chinese cargo valued at USD 3.5 million. Instead of the prosecutor's recommended 7 year prison sentence, he was fined 700 BGN (USD 525) for "threatening" government officials. There is a third case pending against him for smuggling contraband, scheduled for October 5, in which the court will have to

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interview 128 witnesses. On February 18, a powerful bomb destroyed a popular mafia bar in downtown Sofia owned by the Chicken, a bar within walking distance from embassy housing.

¶9. (SBU) Yordan Tonov, aka "the Billy Goat" was arrested in October 2008 along with 13 others on charges of organized crime, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and extortion. Tonov, a close associate of the recently convicted Burgas-based drug lord Dimitar Zhelazkov aka "Mitko the Eyes," allegedly is the leader of a criminal group controlling drug trafficking and prostitution in Southwestern Bulgaria. Ten of Tonov's accomplices, including the Eyes, have pleaded guilty and received reduced sentences of less than five years, while Tonov has elected to take his chances in the Bulgarian courts.

¶10. (C) Comment: The ruling center-right GERB party - touting its leader Boyko Borissov's tough-guy/former cop credentials - swept into power this past July on promises to tackle corruption and fight organized crime. The GERB government must now show the political will to take on the challenge. The August 25 convictions of the Eyes and two Varna "businessmen" on money-laundering, pimping, and criminal association charges were a start, but the European Commission has stressed that prison terms are too short and not enough "big fish" are caught. Bulgaria's organized crime problem cannot be solved overnight, but the successful prosecution and sentencing of even one of these cases would be a huge victory for the new government, and would send a very clear and welcome signal to the Bulgarian public. End Comment.

ORDWAY